



Beyond the Basics

The Art and Science of Playing the Lute

Mind Control: What to Think About When Performing

What goes through the mind of a lutenist when he/she is performing?

Hmmm. I'm feeling kind of nervous. My hands are getting cold and sweaty...Oh no, my tone is getting really thin...Aaaaagggghhh! Another mistake! I played that passage much better at home yesterday...I wonder if I look nervous to everyone...I wish that squirmy kid wasn't sitting in the front row...what's that rustling in the back of the audience?...Oh, I just know they're getting bored with my playing...Why can't I play this piece the way I played it at home yesterday?

I've been there. Thoughts are running wild. Why is there so much anxiety just to play a few tunes? Presumably, you play the lute because you love it, and you are performing so you can share the instrument and music you love with others. But for many (probably most) of us, unwanted thoughts of nervousness and questions of self esteem creep into the mind and eat away at the quality of the performance.

You have to learn to control your own mind: to put away negative, destructive thoughts and replace them with positive thoughts which will help your performance.

It takes practice.

And it doesn't happen all at once. Just as you have to practice a piece of music in order to master it, you have to practice performing in order to become an effective communicator. And you have to practice directing your mind to the right thoughts and feelings to be a good communicator of music through the lute.

If you want to improve your performance skills, you'll need to perform as frequently as possible. Play for friends and relatives, volunteer to play in retirement communities, nursing homes, hospitals, church services, etc. Any chance to play will give you the opportunity to practice performing.

Before the concert: Last minute details and arrangements can distract and even "rattle" a performer just before going onstage. Try to take care of all such details well before your performance.

You will want to walk onstage with an alert, steady mind. Take a moment to calm yourself. Some find that slow, deep breathing is helpful. (I often take a few minutes to meditate before a performance, which helps to focus and calm my mind.)

Then, walk onstage with confidence and happiness that you'll soon get to play.

Before playing the first note:

- Focus your mind on the music.
- Establish the correct tempo in your mind.
- In your emotions, establish the right feeling and mood for the piece of music you're about to play.

As you play: Feel the emotions of the music as vividly as possible, phrase by phrase. There is often a single overall character or affect to a piece of music, but many fluctuations of mood and feeling within that overall character. Portray these fluctuations, and the rise and fall of the melodic lines, through changes in your touch as you stroke the strings. Be sure that these feelings are really coming out of your lute.

Focus your mind and feelings solely on the music. Don't allow yourself to become distracted. Don't let other thoughts in. You must be so deeply involved with the music that there is no room for other thoughts.

Enjoy it, for goodness sake!

Remember, it's not about you, it's about the music. Don't allow concerns about your self-esteem to enter your performance "head space." Let your ego step aside. Live fully in the moment during the performance. Be completely present with your mind and heart melding into the spirit of the music.

If you find yourself becoming distracted, draw yourself back into the music – again and again if necessary.

Mistakes: Everyone makes mistakes. Often performers will fixate on mistakes while performing, and degrade the quality of their performance. A mistake does not ruin a performance. It is much more important to play with feeling and style than to render a technically flawless performance. Also, mistakes always seem bigger to the performer than to the audience. A wrong note which seems like a big mistake to the performer may be barely noticed by the audience. Don't let your mind magnify or dwell on mistakes which occur during the performance. Keep your mind on the music and ignore any mistakes that might come. Don't let them distract you from the most important job of imparting the *spirit* of the music to your audience.

Once again, it takes practice. Don't be discouraged if you cannot get your mind under control after a few practice performances. It takes many, many performances to develop into a strong musical communicator. But, just like the physical muscles of the body, with persistence you can develop and strengthen your "mental muscles" until they become powerful tools to help you in your performance.